

August 16, 1968

Mrs. Sargent Shriver  
The American Embassy  
Paris, France

Dear Mrs. Shriver:

A paper has recently appeared in Nature that discusses an important concept that relates contemporary Vatican policy on birth control as a possible factor in the incidence of Downs Syndrome. My intention is not to prod into an area of religious controversy but to help be sure that the widest possible information becomes available for deliberations on policy in this area.

Dr. Welch points out that failures in the application of the ~~rhythm~~ method, and there are abundant statistics on such failures, would be specifically associated with pregnancies initiated by either irregular ovulation or by the fertilization of eggs delayed beyond their normal expectation. This might be used as an argument that even the rhythm method is hardly free from the criticism of being an interference with the normal course of nature.

The statistics that Dr. Welch quotes that might relate these practices to the actual incidence of mongolism are far from convincing. Mainly they point to the urgency of additional research on such statistics. The cooperation of the Church might be invaluable for mounting these kinds of studies.

In particular I do not know to what extent these statistical studies done so far take account of the rapidly increasing frequency of this form of mental retardation with the age of the mother. It is obvious that any imperfect method of birth control will increase the frequency of motherhood at advanced age. This in itself is a potential hazard to the quality of offspring that needs no further statistical documentation.

I write to you on the assumption that you may be in touch with ecclesiastical groups who should be aware of this kind of information.

Dr. Welch's article has what I would regard as a nonsensical discussion on the relationship of multiple marriage to the Downs Syndrome. Again I do not know how well the factor of maternal age has been considered.

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If this is carefully equalized then there would remain very large considerations of the emotional and physiological health of the parents in question that I would want to see analyzed before undertaking the kinds of speculations that Dr. Welch has brought in here. I hope that this rather shakey paragraph does not detract from the self-evident relevance of the rest of his discussion.

I have left unspoken my sense of commiseration with you and yours about events of the last few months. I am sure you know that this is hardly for lack of feeling and rather that I just do not know what I could add to all that has already been said. I do hope that your husband and your brother will continue the good fight.

Sincerely yours,

Joshua Lederberg,  
Professor of Genetics

JL/gem